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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

...her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.(Matthew 1:19, RSV)

If you were to listen to oldies radio, I bet that from time to time you would hear a 1960's soul group from Washington D.C. called The Winstons. In 1969 they produced a song called "Color Him Father." It's a sentimental song. Well, truth be told, I guess it's a downright sappy song. The poetry doesn't always work, and sure, you could always say that the real world is more complicated than the story the song tells. But I love the song anyway. It refers to something real in this world: to the existence of some good fathers and stepfathers in this world. In fact, this sentimental song nearly always brings a tear to my eye. I'll read aloud just the last verse for you:

He says education is the thing if you
wanna compete
Because without it son, life ain't very
sweet
I love this man I don't know why
Except I'll need his strength till the
day that I die
My mother loves him and I can tell
By the way she looks at him when he
holds my little sister Nell
I heard her say just the other day
That if it hadn't been for him she
wouldn't have found her way
My real old man he got killed in the
war
And she knows she and seven kids
couldn't of got very far
She said she thought that she could
never love again
And then there he stood with that big
wide grin
He married my mother and he took us

in
And now we belong to the man with
that big wide grin

Think I'll color this man father
I think I'll color him love
Said I'm gonna color him father

This is meant to be a sermon in praise of good fathers and stepfathers¹. Not all people have good fathers or stepfathers. Some fathers are drunks, some are abusive, some are lazy and wasteful, some are mean. But Jesus seems to have had a good stepfather. I have long admired Joseph and mean to praise him. And if we are not yet good fathers or stepfathers, then let us consider Joseph as a good example for us to imitate.

It was the destiny of Joseph, like the destiny of many a good father, to fade away. John the Baptist once said that he bore Jesus no jealousy. The way John put it was this:

He must increase, but I must
decrease.(John 3:30, KJV)

So it was with Joseph. We read of him at the start of the Gospel, but soon he fades away. Jesus increases, but Joseph decreases. At the foot of the cross, we find Mary, the mother of our Lord, but there is no mention of Joseph. It is not unreasonable to believe that Joseph had died by the time of our Lord's crucifixion. I mean, that

¹ This sermon is much indebted to the exposition of the Matthew text in *The Lectionary Commentary*, to the essay by Prof. Craig Keener of Eastern Seminary, St. David's, PA.

was thirty-some years later. In an ancient world with poor medicine and its fair share of accidents and violence, Joseph might have died a natural death by the time of our Lord's passion.

Somehow, I think Joseph would not have minded that he fades away. He was a working man — a carpenter. He could have worked his shift, brought his money home, loved Mary his wife, did his chores around the house, took delight in the growth of the lad Jesus, passed on what he knew to the boy, and grew older, greyer, and more feeble as Jesus became a man and grew in fame and followers. One day, Joseph is gone, but that is okay, so long as Jesus and Mary are okay. So many a father has thought.

Our text says that Joseph was a righteous man. What was he — maybe eighteen to twenty years old? That was a customary age for a man to be marrying in ancient Israel. Eighteen to twenty years old. Where did Joseph get his wisdom at such a young age?

Again, the text says that Joseph was a righteous man. Yet also it says that Joseph was contemplating divorce. From this simple combination of ideas, I think we can conclude this: from the Bible's point of view, it is possible to be both righteous and divorced. Let us bear that simple idea in mind whenever we encounter a divorced person. We do not know the whole story. We probably never will.

Judging by our text, Joseph did not lose his righteousness by settling upon divorce. In fact, it seems to have been the other way around. It was not that Joseph was righteous *until* he considered divorce, but rather, *because* Joseph was a righteous man, *therefore* he considered divorce. Mary is pregnant. How else could Joseph interpret her pregnancy but as adultery?

In this day of no-fault divorce, you younger folks might not understand Israel's horror of adultery. But I am of a generation that remembers that once upon a time, our society so opposed adultery that it signaled its dismay at adultery by counting it to be of legal relevance — not just moral, but legal relevance. (But, then, I do not know about legal things. Maybe society still does consider adultery relevant to divorce.)

In any case, back in the days of ancient Israel, the law considered the harm done in adultery to be so deep, and the betrayal so devastating, that it required punishment of the adulterer — perhaps even stoning the adulterer (Deut. 22:21). Joseph was duty-bound to divorce Mary, and he shows his *righteousness* in his intention to do so. But he shows his *mercy* in his intention to divorce her privately.

In ancient Israel, marriage was a two-part procedure.² The first part was the “betrothal” or the consent to marry. Often the bride was young — maybe twelve or thirteen years old. The betrothal had social and economic meaning — possibly with the groom paying a bride-price, the family of the bride paying a dowry, and the two young people being presented to the world as a legal and economic unity. But the betrothal period left husband and wife apart, with the girl continuing to live with her parents. Then, after about a year, the second step took place — the formal transferral — when the groom took his bride to his parents' home and they began to live as husband and wife.

Mary's pregnancy has happened in the middle stage. Mary and Joseph are betrothed, but they are not yet living together as man and wife. But in the eyes of that culture, they are married. Neither can be released from this marriage save by death or by divorce. If Mary had become pregnant by *Joseph* during this middle time, it would have been a matter of small-town gossip, perhaps for years to come, but that is not what happened. Mary is pregnant, but not by Joseph. The natural interpretation is that Mary has committed adultery.

What to do? By rights, Joseph could take her to court, denounce her for adultery, reclaim his bride-price (which might have represented a year of work), perhaps even laid a claim on her dowry. Because Joseph is a righteous man, he wants to do his part to maintain the high standards of marriage. He wants to oppose adultery, and so he is willing to divorce Mary...

² See, for example, Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Image Books, 1977, pages 123-24.

only, in the gentleness of his nature, he resolves to divorce her quietly and privately.

In such a way, he would be doing his best to release her with as much honor left her as he could. Only, this quiet and private way of doing things deprives himself of his chance to reclaim his bride-price — something that might have been very important for a working man, indeed part of his hopes for his future. But, let that go. Joseph has it on his mind to divorce Mary, but to do so quietly.

So, that is one reason I admire this young man, Joseph: in the gentleness of his nature, he is willing to lose his bride-price and his chance to publicly denounce Mary.

Now, here is another reason I admire Joseph. When the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and explains that he should not fear to take Mary as his wife, and that the child she bears is a holy child, Joseph *believes* the angel. He does not chalk the vision up to some random dream in the night — to the mental froth of a weary brain. No, he simply believes the angel. This is not the rationality of a computer, but the rationality of love. In a dream, an angel speaks to him of impossibility: She is pregnant, yet she is a virgin. To this impossibility, Joseph simply says, okay, and goes about his way. But I don't blame him for believing the angel. At least this way, he gets to keep his Mary.

So, life goes on. Sooner or later, Mary and Joseph reach that second stage of the matrimony. Mary moves to Joseph's house and they begin living as husband and wife. But Mary — she's not as slender as she used to be. What can this mean? Have Mary and Joseph been sleeping together even before the official transfer? If so, it reflects badly on them in that society.

But the beautiful thing here is that Mary and Joseph show themselves to be kindred spirits, for each of them is willing to bear shame for the sake of a good cause. Mary has already given her consent to this miracle: "Let it be with me according to your word," she had said to the angel. Yet in giving her consent to that miracle, she exposed herself to the charge of adultery and shame.

And now, Joseph does the same thing: he sets aside the gossip and talk of shame and goes ahead and lives with Mary and declares her child to be his child. Let the world talk. Joseph is a man. He cares less about public opinion than he cares about how to take care of this woman and this child.

This is the household in which Jesus was raised. These are the kind of parents Jesus had. It was said of Jesus that he was obedient to his parents and grew up in favor with God and man³. I suspect that his parents were worthy of his obedience and his honor.

These two — Mary and Joseph — raised a son who, in turn, was gentle and incline toward forgiveness. They raised a son who one day would say to the adulterer:

Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.(John 8:11, KJV)

And would pray for those who crucified him,

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.(Luke 23:34)

No matter what we have done so far, no matter what kind of father or mother we might have been so far, we can become more like Joseph and Mary. With the Lord, there is forgiveness. The same Lord who so profoundly loves the one we have hurt, also profoundly loves us and yearns for us to draw closer to him and to the people he has entrusted to us.

Mary and Joseph raised a son who could change a fisherman into an apostle, a saint into a sinner. And I am not so surprised at that. Let's see what he can do with us. To Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, be the glory, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

³And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.(Luke 2:51-52, KJV)